

Different Shades of Hero: Age of Legends

by Captain Mush

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Summary: - Multiple heroes. Multiple stories. One war. - This is basically the back-stories of the original heroes and the story of their fight with the Black Mage, and everything in between. Adventure, heroism, sprinklings of humor, and mushrooms. Updates irregularly.

1. Introduction: Heroes

**Multiple heroes. Multiple stories. One war.**

This will be the first in a series of stories that follow all the heroes, from their past to the in-game quests to the final fight against the Black Mage. This one, Age of Legends, focuses on the "past heroes," meaning Mercedes, Aran, Phantom, Luminous, and Freud. There will be one story for each "category" meaning explorers, Cygnus Knights, Sengoku, etc. It will also have one story for the final fight with the Black Mage.

Mild violence, language, and blood.

* * *

<p>hero

É^{hi}(É[™])rÅ•

noun

** 1.** a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities.

What is a hero?

Is a hero the brave noble warrior who single-handedly vanquishes a great evil?

Is a hero the humble young child who stands up against darkness?

...What is a hero?

When people looked at us, they only saw the side that was valiant and courageous and powerful. When people looked at us, they only saw the side that was "hero."

But we are no more than normal people, no different. We too succumb to fear and greed and jealousy and so much more. We are no stronger than normal people and oftentimes we too feel that we are too weak and insignificant.

The only difference is that we never gave up.

We never gave up, even while the future looked bleak to everyone else, in that chaos we saw that there would always be a light, always be a hope, and we toiled for that hope.

We may have started low and small and helpless, but we never gave up and worked towards that day when we could make the world a better place, and so that is what we did.

Some may have been more "hero" than others, but they were still heroes.

Hero, through and through, forever in their hearts, they will always be "hero."

Know this, and remember it always:

Anyone can be a hero.

* * *

><p>One of the gimmicks here is that the introduction for each story is exactly the same except one different character from each "category" narrates it and puts their own spin on it.<p>

Any feedback and/or suggestions are greatly appreciated :)

2. Chapter 1: Born to Magic

When you fall asleep and start dreaming about yourself chatting with some other people that you don't even know, but you're acting like you're all friends, it's got to be not just a dream.

I was sitting around a campfire at night with four other people, only I looked years older. The girl on the left was fair-skinned and looked pretty, but her ears were pointed like an elf's and two weird gun-like contraptions rested at her side. She carried herself with such grace that she seemed out of place, joking around a fire. Next to that girl " she was most definitely an elf, now that I saw her more clearly " was a guy with light blond hair and purple eyes that glinted with mischief. He wore a weird hat that looked like an upside-down cup and a raven's beak wrapped together with a vibrant blue cloth. Whatever it was, he looked incredibly rich. On the other

side of the fire, there was a girl with tanned skin that contrasted her white-gray hair. A large polearm, decorated with jewels, was propped up against a tree behind her. She seemed to be laughing, but I could tell that she wasn't someone you'd like to end up on the wrong side with unless you fancied being mauled by sharp objects. And next to her was a mage " I could tell by the robes " who wielded a double-ended wand and had a strange ball of light orbiting around him. His hair was light gray and tipped with blue, and his expression was rather serious.

But the most confusing was me " on my right was a huge dragon, bigger than any I'd ever seen even in books, with a strange glowing rune on its forehead. Its scales were a deep shade of purple and its horns and claws were a rich golden color. It seemed friendly enough, but I still didn't understand what it was doing there.

The vision began to fade, and I panicked. I still wanted to see more. What did it mean? Who were those people? What was that dragon?

Suddenly I felt a burning sensation on my back and I shot up, the dream shattered. "Argh! Who set my clothes on fire?!"

My mom was standing over me, her wand tipped with a flame. Her face was a mixture of laughter and slight annoyance, as she twirled her weapon playfully. "Morning, Freud!" she said cheerfully like nothing was wrong.

I quickly swatted out the small fire she had ignited on my back. "Since when do you wake people up by setting their clothes on fire?" I demanded, my face flushing red, not just because of the heat.

"Since now," my mom replied, swinging her wand around. I ducked to avoid getting hit. She looked at me and laughed all of a sudden.

"What, do I have something on my face?" I grumbled, straightening my hair, which was pretty much a futile attempt since it was always messy.

"As a matter of fact," she said, conjuring a mirror of ice. "You do."

I looked at my reflection and groaned. My whole face was splotted with ink. I must've spilled it while shifting around in my sleep, which was something I did a lot.

"Freud, you really need to stop staying up so late studying," my mom scolded, glancing at the heaps of books. "You fell asleep with your face in papers again," she added, putting emphasis on "again."

"Not my fault!" I protested, throwing my hands up in surrender and stifling a chuckle. "Anyway, I should probably get all this ink off..."

"Done," she said, as the ice mirror melted and the water splashed all over my face. I coughed and choked, but couldn't stop laughing.

"Mom, you could've ruined some of my books!" I shouted, trying my best to sound aggravated, but it really was hard to get mad at her.

She frowned. "Speaking of books...you should be practicing more magic, you know. You can barely light a fire, and there are much more complex spells out there."

"It's not like I'm really going to need them in Henesys. Here it's all about archery." Sighing, I pushed away the clutter on my desk and attempted to clean off all the ink and water.

"Daniella!" my dad called from downstairs. There was the sound of crackling electricity along with things crashing and breaking. He probably blew up another room again, since he liked to mess with explosive spells.

My mom called back, "Coming, Frederick!" She turned to me and handed me her wand, winking. As I stared at it in surprise, she said, "About time you got a new one." Then she left the room and hurried down the stairs.

I sighed and tossed a couple of scraps away. Even though my parents were funny and nice, they were always bugging me about learning magic â€" after all, they were two of the most powerful mages in Victoria Island. And they expected me to live up to their standards, which were pretty much in space and beyond. Fingering my new wand, I gazed in awe at the simple yet elegant design. It was medium-sized and gold-colored, topped with a light blue orb with two wings extending from the sides.

Since I couldn't really focus anymore â€" what with Mother setting my clothes on fire â€" I decided to take a stroll around the house and think, as I did often. I'm pretty sure my footprints are practically imprinted in the floor by now.

As I walked past the library, I suddenly felt a chilly breeze, although faint. The window inside wasn't open, the last time I checked. I opened the door slightly. Inside, a figure was crouched in the middle of the room. His back was turned to me so I couldn't see his face, but I knew that he was examining an object.

I flung the door open and took out my wand, lighting the tip on fire. "Who are you?" I shouted, pointing it at the figure.

He turned around and I recoiled, because it was one of the people I had seen in my dream â€" the person with the weird hat. Sure, he looked years younger and he didn't have that hat, but I recognized the look in those purple eyes. But something was...different.

Standing up, he twirled the thing he was looking at. It was a large, thick book, its cover studded with jewels and flowing writing. "Interesting," he mused. "I certainly didn't expect someone to discover me, much less a child."

"Speak for yourself," I snapped. "You look barely over thirteen."

Glancing at the fire dancing on the tip of my wand, he chuckled

lightly. "You're not really going to try and attack me with a fire spell, are you?"

I spread my arms, taking care not to thump the wand's tip against anything. "We are in a wooden house," I replied, stressing every word.

He studied me. I had the same feeling again, and now I was sure of it. This guy wasn't bad. He was a thief, sure, but he just didn't...give an evil vibe. I lowered my wand and extinguished the fire. He seemed surprised, and I said, "Answer my question. Who are you?"

"I believe some things are not meant for words," he returned. A wind blew me back, and as I shielded my eyes, he disappeared in a whirl of cards, leaving one behind.

I picked it up and felt its smooth surface - it was made out of a very smooth material and had an intricate design on the back. When I flipped it around, I saw that the front was inscribed with one word: "Phantom." A bit too flashy for my taste, but I tucked the carte into my pocket anyway. Inspecting the room again, I realized that he had taken the book too.

"Figures," I grumbled, kicking around some random papers. "He's a thief, of course."

But why did I see him in my dream? I had way too many unanswered questions, and the only way I was ever going to figure something out was â€" obviously â€" submerge myself in books again.

And this time, I had no intention of falling asleep.

3. Chapter 2: I'll Make You Proud

Even a year later, my parents never found out who stole the book, and I didn't tell them, I did not intend on selling Phantom out, especially if that dream meant something important. My parents got over it quickly though, and they soon forgot that it had ever happened. But now, I had other things to worry about. I was learning more about magic now, and only yesterday I had fried a hole in the wall with a stray lightning bolt. Excellent progress.

In other words, everything was perfectly normal. Until that day, when one knock on the door changed everything.

"So you've got to focus really intensely, like this - " My dad squeezed his eyes shut so tightly that I could see his eyebrows scrunched together like one big fuzzy line. He was "focusing" so hard that his entire face was practically wrinkled all over, and I doubled over, snickering.

He chuckled and swatted at me playfully. "You're breaking my concentration, Freud!"

"Yeah...your concentration...on disfiguring your...face!" I replied, choking on my laughter.

Resuming his serious expression, my dad pointed his wand at the

practice target and fired a bolt of lightning. It split the target cleanly in half with a loud _CRACK-BOOM_, leaving a sizzling mark.

"Woah," I marveled, running my fingers over the charred and smoking wood. "That was amazing!"

"It's actually pretty simple once you - " He scrunched his face up again, and I laughed. " - focus!"

I made an exaggerated bowing motion. "O great and wise one, do teach me your ways of distorting your face in concentration."

He ruffled my hair and grinned. "Humor sure runs in the family, doesn't it?"

I was about to say something when someone knocked on the door. I heard my mom rushing to open it, and my dad frowned. "A visitor? We don't get those too often." Thumping me on my back, he stood up and said, "Keep on practicing."

By the time the target was now hosting a couple dozen burn marks, the voices downstairs had rose very high. I couldn't make out anything they were saying, so I quietly walked down the stairs.

At the door was a strange man who had a strangely calm voice. He didn't look like anyone from Henesys to me, so he could be a traveler asking for directions. Then again, our house was located in the outskirts of the town, so people rarely came by without actually knowing my parents.

I watched from a distance, not wanting to interrupt. They seemed to be in a heated discussion - my dad was shouting, my mom was trying to keep her cool, and the guy just kept talking in that weird chilly voice of his.

"Why do you care so much about it?" Mother said, her voice even but trembling slightly.

"I said," the man responded coldly, "where is the Dragon Wand?"

He must mean the wand my mom gave me, I realized in shock. _It did have dragon wings on it after all..._

"And why should we tell you?" Father yelled. "I demand you leave this house right now"

"It never even worked anyway," she added in defense. "We could never use it that well, even with our level of skill." That part was true, for some reason the wand seemed to like me better than my mom and dad.

The man stayed quiet for a while. I'd thought he was about to leave, but suddenly he thrust out his hand and a blast of energy blew my parents backwards. He stepped forward and stood over their still bodies, triumphant, and then turned to me. His gaze rested on the wand - the Dragon Wand, he had called it. For a moment I saw something in his eyes - it was a look of pure malice and evil, and it sent chills down my spine.

Paralyzed in shock, I just stood there, unable to comprehend. Then he rushed at me, everything unfroze, and instinct took over. I held up my wand and sent a bolt towards him, hitting him right in the stomach. He swore and started to get up, but I rushed out the door. I knew he was following, but I had to keep running. Magic attacks from my pursuer scorched my feet, but I kept on running. Eventually, I realized I was tiring out and getting slower. I didn't have a chance â€" I would have to turn around and fight.

I stopped and turned to face him, gripping my wand tightly as the tip swirled with energy. Concentrating all of my remaining strength into the orb of light forming at the tip, I let it out with one yell. The man shouted something I couldn't hear, and as the light grew bigger, exhaustion swamped me like a thick wave, and I passed out. But I knew somewhere that I wasn't being followed anymore. Still...Mother...Father...they were dead...but why?

Why?

When I woke up, the first thing I registered was that every single part of my body ached and I felt completely drained of energy. I tried to sit up, but a pair of hands pushed me back down.

"Easy there!" a voice said that sounded distinctly female. I blinked and tried to refocus my vision. Leaning over me, with an expression of concern, was a tall mage clothed in beige. Her hair was straight and neat and a pair of glasses sat on her nose. She looked stern but caring at the same time. "You're still injured. Don't push yourself."

I looked around, examining my surroundings. I was clearly in a library, books stacked in the shelves that rose up to the ceiling. The bed I was resting on was on a loft above the ground floor, and in the center was a giant crystal glowing with magic symbols and wrapped with vines. But wherever this was, it definitely wasn't anywhere near where I lived. Just how far had I ran?

"I feel like wet noodles. What happened?" I asked, my throat hoarse and parched.

"You expended most of your mana," she said, handing me my wand. I took it gingerly, my fingers shaky. "That was quite some explosion you created, especially for someone your age."

That wasn't exactly what I had been expecting to hear. "What about the other guy?"

She frowned and studied me carefully. "What other guy? When we found you, there was no one else nearby."

Now I was more confused than ever. "We?"

"Is he awake, Miriam?" a deep voice called from the other side of the room. A man with a long white robe and a tall white hat pulled over his eyes floated over to us - yes, floated. His long beard and wrinkled skin showed that he was clearly really old.

The beige-clothed mage, Miriam, sighed in relief. "Yes, just exhausted and probably disoriented." Disoriented, you bet. I had no idea what just happened, and quite frankly, I didn't think I really

wanted to know. Whoever - whatever - that guy was, he radiated evil like nothing else I'd ever seen.

"Um, introductions?" I prompted, noting how Miriam seemed to treat this old guy with extreme respect. He looked like a mage too, but then again I could sense all the energy humming in the air. This was definitely a place with many magicians around.

The old man chuckled. "Straight to the point like your father, I see. But you are also polite like your mother." A surge of emotions sprang up and I winced. He obviously didn't know what just happened, and if there was one thing I'd always hated, it was being the bearer of bad news. "My name is Grendel, though most call me Grendel the Really Old. It's a pleasure to meet you, Freud."

"You know me? And my parents?"

Grendel stroked his beard. "Yes, I mentored both of them when they were young." Another pang of sadness sliced through me like a cold knife. He glanced at me and noticed my pained expression. "Is there something wrong?"

"My parents...they were killed," I said, choking on the words. A tear slipped down my face and I desperately tried to pull myself together.

Miriam and Grendel looked at each other for a second, faces tight with shock and anger. Finally, after a moment of awkward silence and the sounds of my shuddering breaths, Miriam sat down next to me and hesitated for a moment, as if trying to figure out what to say so that they wouldn't trigger any mass hysteria. "I'm very sorry to hear that," she said sincerely. "We were close friends in our childhood."

I tightened my grip on my wand - the last thing I had from my mother, and the only thing from my father was a simple earring.

The elderly mage looked thoughtful for a while, staring off into space. "Do you remember what happened?"

Nodding, I explained how the strange man had come to our house, asking for the Dragon Wand (they had seemed surprised that I was able to use it), and had killed my parents when they insisted that we no longer had it, and how I had ran away and how I had attacked him, their frowns growing deeper with each word. When I finished, my voice was trembling and my eyes were growing wet again.

Grendel stroked his beard so vigorously that I was afraid he was going to start pulling it off. "What did this man look like?"

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't really gotten a good look at him. I mean, who could blame me? After all, I was running for my life. "He was wearing a black cape and black clothes," I offered, even though I knew it was barely anything. "And he had pale hair and purple eyes, and his hair covered one of his eyes."

"Is that all you know?" There was a slight strain in her voice.

I nodded, switching my attention to the window next to me. Outside was a large forest of thick trees and houses built around them, with

rope bridges spanning the gaps. Fairies fluttered around, and occasionally young mages would walk past carrying huge piles of books or casting random spells.

It was quiet again. Grendel sighed deeply and gestured for Miriam. She stood up and followed him, but not before calling, "Make sure you get plenty of rest."

I leaned back and mulled over my thoughts for a bit. My body still hurt, but the pain had been reduced to a dull throb. Resting wasn't going to make me feel better, and then it struck me.

I was in a library.

A library. Duh!

Still rather shaky, I got up and walked over to the shelves. There was a crate nearby, and I climbed onto it and began to browse through the books, running my fingers over the spines. Some of these texts were old and worn while others looked just brand new. Accidentally, I stepped back, and my foot slipped off the crate. I fell down with a thud and my shoulder bumped against something hard and cold. Turning around, I saw that I had accidentally touched the giant crystal, and now the surface of it felt odd and tingly.

Oops.

Scrambling to my feet, I was about to grab my wand and try to fix it with a spell when a strange feeling shot through my head. My sight blurred and shook, and then suddenly I wasn't there anymore.

Another vision?

This time, I saw myself and those four other people again. The huge dragon was there too, but something was wrong. As I looked more closely, I could see that they all looked injured - some were very bruised, others were scratched and bleeding, and overall they were in rather bad shape. One of the dragon's horns was snapped clean off, and its wings were tattered. But what scared me the most was the huge shadow looming over them. I couldn't quite tell what it was, but it gave off an aura of malice so strong I struggled to breathe, and I was certain of one thing - this feeling was exactly the same as the one that strange man had given off, only ten times more stronger. Around them, there were destroyed houses, burning towns, charred forests, and destruction everywhere.

I don't know how or why, but my mind said: _This is the future._

Now that the shock was subsiding, I could remember bits and pieces about this Grendel the Really Old. Yes, he was really old, over hundreds of years old, in fact. He was famous for his skill with magic - but he was also famous for being the Magician Instructor. My parents had studied under him, so...why couldn't I?

Part of me wanted to protest that I was only eleven and that there was no way anyone as powerful and wise as Grendel would accept an eleven-year old as his student, but the other part of me shouted back that I was too weak.

Yes, I was too weak, and maybe if I were stronger I could have protected my parents. But that was gone now, and I thought back to the vision I had. If that really was the future, like my instinct had practically screamed, then I needed to learn more, not just for me, but for the rest of the world.

For the rest of the worldâ€¦|

Mother...Father...watch over meâ€¦|

I'll make you proud.

4. Chapter 3: How to Train Your Dragon

"Draconian Encyclopedia," I mused, fingering the beaten cover and faded fabric. The book was very thick and had emitted a huge puff of cobwebs when I had pulled it out of the huge stack of neglected books. As far as I could tell, the author of this ancient text had taken care to put a massive amount of detail and explanation into every subject, so why had this ended up buried in a heap of old books no one wanted to read anymore? A book this extensive shouldn't have been left to rot among other strange titles such as "The Anatomy of Slimes" (they didn't even have bones) or "Magical Baking for Dummies" (the only thing about that book that made sense was the title, only a dummy would want to read about "magical baking").

Well, no use standing around and guessing. I opened the book, coughing slightly at the dust cloud it threw up. This obviously hadn't been opened in a long time. Running my finger over the eroded writing, I read aloud, "Common dragons include red dragons, blue dragons green dragons gold dragons blah blahâ€¦|"

This section didn't really tell much. Anything mentioned in here was also written in other newer books, albeit in a much briefer form. Flipping the page, I squinted to make out the words. "Special dragons," I whispered, staring in awe. I hadn't heard anything about this anywhere else, so maybe it was something in this part that people didn't really like. Curiosity gnawed at me, and I remembered that in both visions, I had seen a huge dragon. It didn't match the descriptions of any common dragon I had read about so far, so it must be a special dragon. Now thoroughly interested, I kept on going. "Serpents, neutral, magic, blahâ€¦|" That dragon was definitely not a serpent. "...mutant dragons, Horntail, three heads, blahâ€¦|" Seeing how I was nearly at the end of the book, I was starting to lose hope. Maybe I had missed a page? Still, there was more left to read. "Onyx Dragons..." For a second I wondered if I had read that right. As soon as I saw that name, something inside of me jumped up and I felt...drawn to it. "Elusive, rare, powerfulâ€¦|wise...only type of dragon to have a king...found most often in the forests of Ellinia."

No, wait...there was one more note, scrawled hastily underneath the neat writing of the author: _Extremely dangerous. Kill on sight._

That couldn't be right. The book had described them as powerful and wise, so why would anyone label them as enemies? Why would anyone label any sort of dragon as enemies? I mean, sure, Horntail was vicious and evil, but it was clearly written that most dragons only

attacked in self-defense.

"Heeey, Freud!" a voice called from behind me.

I was startled so badly I jumped up and nearly knocked over my chair. Turning around I realized that it was just Diana, one of Grendel's newest apprentices and the official errand-runner. She walked in, marveling at all the ancient books. "Wow, Freud, you sure do read a lot."

"What do you need, Diana?" I said irritably, annoyed that my reading was interrupted. I slipped one hand behind my back and quietly closed the book, shoving it to the side.

She pouted slightly, which fit her small and rather young-looking face. Sometimes I just couldn't look at her without imagining a temperamental bunny. "Grendel just sent me to get you, that's all. Really, that's all."

"And on this episode of Diana the Incredibly Annoying Errand-Runner," I announced in a bored voice, straightening the piles of books.

"C'mon, can't you be cheerful for once? He wants you to help out with something." Diana wrinkled her nose distastefully. "I'm pretty sure it involves monster parts."

"Why me?" I complained, feeling a bit more grumpy than usual. "Why can't he just ask someone else?"

"Cause, you're his best student, duh!" She spread her arms placatingly. "Just hurry up, Freud. I think it's something serious." For once, she might've added.

Sighing, I tucked the book into my pouch and closed the flap. Being called Grendel's best student was a complete overstatement, since I had only been studying here for a couple years. Some others had been here for nearly twice as long as me and they weren't much more than junior apprentices. Then again, Grendel had called me a senior no more than two years in, although the only thing I really ever did was read and experiment with random things, resulting in weird creations such as potions that made you a lot faster for a couple minutes or spells that made things shrink. Of course, sometimes things went wrong and once I accidentally made a concoction that turned the unlucky user purple with red polka-dots. But I could still barely create a blizzard or brew up a storm. My magic was...how did he put itâ€¦|"capable of devastating power, but lacking the strength to do so." And when I focused, I could sense that I radiated a lot less energy than other students, even the newer ones.

Oh well. Mysteries are meant to be mysterious, after all. They didn't just walk up to your front door, fling off their disguise and say: _By the way, this is really what I am._

I pushed open the door to Grendel's room to find him and his assistant, Miriam, in a serious discussion. The two of them talked in hushed and urgent tones while I stood uncomfortably at the door, waiting.

Finally they seemed to realize that I was there and turned to me.

Grendel looked at me and smiled. "Ah, Freud. I'm glad to see that Diana delivered my request properly."

I bowed respectfully. "Did you need me for something, sir?"

"Yes, I did." He pushed a small bag across his desk to me, and I picked it up. Inside was a Surgeon Eye tail that felt warm. I nearly dropped it out of revulsion, but kept a hold of it anyway.

"Something looks different about this tail," I noted, examining the surface. Normally Surgeon Eye tails were rough and scaly, but this one was bumpy and covered in jagged spikes. When I touched it, shivers traveled down my spine.

Grendel nodded approvingly. "Observant as always, Freud. Yes, the Surgeon Eyes have changed, but not just them. Monsters all around Victoria Island have become increasingly violent and powerful, attacking anything that moves. Their numbers have increased dramatically as well, and when one falls, ten more take their place."

I was beginning to grasp where this conversation was going. "And you want me to investigate."

"Correct." He pointed to a small area of forest on a map resting on the desk, and I craned my neck to see it. "Here is where I want you to look around. Try to avoid trouble, because the monsters are getting more and more unpredictable. And bring back any samples you can find."

The forest...then I might be able to find an Onyx Dragon! And maybe get some of my questions answered as well. Though I doubt anyone would know anything about my visions - after all, they were future events - but the subject of Onyx Dragons just tugged at me.

Lost in thought, I contemplated the possibility of finding a dragon even while so many mobs were around until Miriam's voice snapped me back to reality.

"Freud? Are you alright?" she prompted.

"Oh, y-yes," I said hastily, bowing. "I'll be going then." I exited quickly through the door, feeling my bag to make sure the book was still there.

For once, books didn't give me all my answers. This was going to be interesting.

I was disappointed.

Not only had I not found any traces of an Onyx Dragon, the moment I had stepped into the forest all the Surgeon Eyes immediately rushed me like a pack of angry wolves. I had returned to the library with more than plenty of claws, teeth, and tails, but as a bonus I had also brought back with me a couple dozen scratches. _Joy._

"This is troubling news," Miriam said as she looked over each specimen carefully. "I can't find anything wrong with their bodies, per se, but I have discovered an unusual amount of dark energy

emanating from them."

"The same dark energy has also been found coming from the Pepes of El Nath and the Brown Teddies of Ludibrium, though much stronger," I mused, racking my brain for possibilities. No wonder I couldn't find any dragons, if they were sensible they were probably hiding from the Surgeon Eyes. "Maybe all the monsters are being controlled by one common force?" I suggested.

Miriam thought for a bit. "That is entirely possible," she said slowly, as if not wanting to tell me something. "I have heard that there is a powerful magician out there who was lost to darkness, and has been lurking around Ossyria. But that's all I know."

"A dark mage," I said, brooding over what this could mean. Could it be related to the vision I saw? Many times over the past years, I've tried touching the crystal, but I didn't have anymore visions. Occasionally I heard the sounds of a battle, of screams and of fire burning and of metal clashing metal, and more often I heard nothing. But every time something happened, it was always the same feeling - the air would turn thick and become sludge in my lungs, swallowing me with fear - and the same sensation was given off by the strange man years ago along with the mutated monsters. Whoever this dark mage person was, he'd obviously been stirring up trouble for a long time, and only now was he beginning to make himself known.

"It's nothing to be worried about," she said reassuringly, though she didn't seem quite sure. I felt slightly indignant - just because I was young doesn't mean that I can't handle a little bit of bad news. Be soft on the kids, that's what all the parents seem to think. But the world is hard on everyone, and there was no telling what could happen. "He doesn't seem too eager to attack Victoria Island, what with all the guards from Ereve stationed here."

I bowed and quickly excused myself from the room. Gripping my wand tightly, I set out for the forests just on the outskirts of Ellinia. Certainly there was a higher chance of finding an Onyx Dragon where the monsters would be weaker, and I could definitely survive an all-out Slime assault, since they were so easy to defeat.

At first, the area seemed quiet and tranquil. I could almost think that it was a safe place to just plop down and take a nap, but the air was thick with tension. Besides the occasional sound of rustling bushes and the calls of birds, I heard nothing. But as soon as I stepped on a twig, snapping it, all over the forest there was a shuffling sound and waves upon waves of slimes mobbed me, looking delighted: _Yay, food! Let's all go kill it!_ I gathered energy into my hand and my wand raced with electricity. "Stay back!" I yelled, brandishing my wand. All of the slimes recoiled as if I'd just lit a forest fire, and they retreated back into the shadows of the trees.

In my free hand, I conjured a small orb of light and examined the ground. The grass was soft and tall, with the footprints of travelers showing faintly once in a while. But there was one place where I could've sworn the grass was crushed down further than any other footprint I've seen. Exhilaration rising in my chest, I hurried over. Deep in the earth was the imprint of an absolutely gigantic foot, with three thick claws. Holding my wand in my mouth, I brought out the book and flipped it open to the section on Onyx Dragons, were

there was a diagram of one's tracks. Lying side-by-side with the huge print, they matched exactly.

So the book was right! Onyx Dragons did live here after all, and this footprint looked recent. I quickly shoved it back into my bag and followed the trail, being careful to avoid the branches strewn around the forest floor. As I went deeper and deeper into the woodland, the leaves stretched out further and very little sunlight came through the treetops. A lot more monsters shifted around in the shade, with the electricity running through my wand and the tiny orb of light just barely keeping them at bay. Suddenly, a cold wind blew, and I stopped. Looking around warily, I realized that all of the monsters had disappeared into the folds of gloom. My skin crawled, and I intensified the light in my hand. "Who's there?" I shouted, the tip of my wand crackling.

Crunch.

A sharp rattling sound echoed behind me. I whirled around, and nearly scrambled into a tree. Standing over me was a skeletal dragon-like creature with curled horns and curved claws. It advanced menacingly, snapping its bony teeth. Hands trembling, I held up my wand and tried to channel energy through it, but every spell I used was deflected with ease by the monster. It kept advancing, slowly but surely.

I need to get help, somehow

Focusing my remaining strength into it, I raised my wand up and shot a flare into the sky. It was rather dim and hard to see, but that was all I could manage. Exhaustion flooding me, my limbs felt heavy and I backed up closer against the tree.

Someone has to see it

The Skelegon growled and lashed out at me. I jumped out of the way, but it grazed my shoulder and cut through the cloth. Beads of sweat broke out on my forehead, and as I examined the wound, I realized that a shade of green was spreading from the cut.

Poison. Damn.

My movements began to slow down and my chest grew tight. I knew if the monster attacked me again, I'd be dead. I fired a lightning bolt, but I could sense my magic weakening. It kept walking towards me, its bones rattling. I backed up further and further until my legs turned to jelly and I noted that the poison was spreading much too quickly. I collapsed, breathing heavily, trying to hold onto one last hope.

Come on There's no way no one could've seen that flare_

Just as it was about to deal the final blow, the Skelegon stopped and turned its head around all the way to the back. I could hear a pounding sound in the distance, as though something large and heavy were running fast. Then a column of flame engulfed the skeletal dragon, and it collapsed, disintegrating into cinders.

Minions of darkness are not welcome in this forest, a low voice rumbled. It wasn't a sound, it was more like a slight echo coming from somewhere in the back of my mind.

Telepathy? I wondered, my head feeling woozy. I tried to get up, but I was too weak. Then I looked up and yelped in surprise.

Standing over me was a huge dragon, its dark scales reflecting the sunlight, with golden horns and claws. It was an Onyx Dragon - no, it was the dragon from my visions - except that it didn't have the rune on its forehead.

I was sure of it now, my entire being was being drawn towards it like a magnet, and I could sense its mana as well. The strangest thing was that the sensation felt powerful, but incomplete...like mine.

Powerful...but incompleteâ€|

Two halvesâ€|

Duh!

The dragon tilted its head and looked at me. Humans rarely venture into this area of the forest. _Are you injured?_ it questioned, in the same strange voice that I only heard in my mind.

"Poison," I managed, trying to catch my breath. "But what...wasâ€|" Pain shot through my chest, and I doubled over, gripping it tightly. There's no way the venom could have spread this fastâ€|

It seemed slightly surprised that I was talking to it, and leaned down closer to inspect the scratch. _I see_, it mused. _This is no ordinary poison. I believe I should be able to heal itâ€|_

Laying one claw on my injury, I felt energy flow through me and the weight me lifted, letting me exhale. I stood up shakily and coughed. "Thanks, umâ€|?"

Afrien, he responded. Dipping his head slightly, he added, _I am the king of the Onyx Dragons._

"Oh!" I ducked my head in embarrassment. "I had no idea...I apologize if I was rude, sir. My name is Freud."

He chuckled slightly. _No need for apologies, Freud. Though I had always thought humans did not understand my kind_. My face flushed slightly. _And as to answer your previous questionâ€| Afrien glanced meaningfully at the pile of ash that once was the Skelegon. That creature was sent by the Black Mage._

"Black Mageâ€|?" I said, confused.

A low growl rose in his throat. _Have you not heard of him?_ His voice was tinged with faint anger. _He has been attacking parts of Ossyria. Last I heard, he destroyed half of Minar Forest. And as far as I know...he is not one to let his targets escape easily._

Instinctively, I reached into his mind, and I could tell that he cared deeply for all life, and was furious by the Black Mage's actions, killing masses of innocents. I could sympathise with his

feelings, because now I was sure of it...my parents' murder was connected to the Black Mage, if not directly.

Something in me ticked - if he had sent a monster after me, could it mean...that this Black Mage knew about the future too? And whatever role I played in the future...he didn't like it.

It was a crazy idea, but surprisingly it didn't seem too far-fetched.

Sighing, the dragon stretched out._ I would fight him if I could...but his power outmatches mine, as well as that of any Onyx Dragon._

I squinted at him. "But you completely incinerated that monster back there! If you're that strong, then - "

Unfortunately, my power is very limited. I may be able to unleash powerful attacks, but I lack the magic energy to fully utilize them. As it has always been with my race. I detected a hint of frustration in his expression, frustration at the fact that he couldn't do anything.

"What if there was a way to fight back?" I suggested, not daring to breathe. "Would you do it?"

Why do you ask? Afrien looked at me quizzically.

"Because I think I have a way," I said eagerly, and as he leaned down to listen, I began to explain my idea.

5. Chapter 4: A Rising Threat

**~Peetable: **Thank you very much ^w^ I try to include humor in every chapter because writing serious stuff is kind of ehh... Glad you enjoyed and have a nice day too :)

* * *

><p>"I think I've got it," I said excitedly, referring back to my book to make sure I didn't get anything wrong. After nearly a week of preparing and intense studying, my idea was ready.<p>

Afrien watched me, eyes alert. _Will this really work, Freud?_

"According to my research, it should. Basically, all it does is use a series of spells to bind two spirits together, hence the name 'Spirit Pact.' It can work with any other person and animal, but it's best with Onyx Dragons," I explained, double-checking everything in my mind. "It shares their strength, magic, vitality, etc. So if I get stronger, you'll become stronger too. But it also works the same way with injuries - I guess that's really the major downside."

Shall we proceed then? He lowered his head slightly to be level with me.

I nodded and closed the book, holding up my wand. As I began to chant and energy swirled around us, the very air hummed with magic. A ring

of glowing light appeared at my feet and I continued, feeling Afrien's soul and mine sliding together, slowly but surely.

A bright yellow rune in the shape of a dragon appeared on my hand, with a matching one on Afrien's forehead. I kept chanting, and our spirits merged into one. Energy coursed through my body, and I felt rejuvenated, as if I'd just had a refreshing drink.

This sensation...it's surprising, he noted, summing up the experience.

"We've done it...the first Spirit Pact." I looked in awe at the mark on my hand.

I feel stronger already. But this is only just the beginning...we will need much more strength to face the Black Mage. And, perhaps, even allies.

My expression hardened. While Afrien and I were figuring out how to make a Spirit Pact, the Black Mage and made himself more and more known. Now the forests of Minar were utterly destroyed, and the Nihal Desert was under attack. Even worse yet, the monster population in Victoria Island had swelled too. There was talk floating around that he planned to steal the powers of Rhinne, the Transcendent of Time. He definitely liked shooting for the stars - quite literally, since her temple was located in the sky.

"Right now, we're still much too weak to even leave Ellinia," I observed. "We need to train harder. But, you said 'we'... You're planning on coming along too?"

He hummed slightly. _Of course. After all, we depend on each other._

"But you're a king!" I protested. "Don't the rest of your kind need you?"

Smiling, he shook his head. _Among the dragons, the title of king does not mean the same as with humans. A king is simply someone whom others can turn to for advice. The Onyx Dragons will be able to live without me._

"Alright, Afrien. I understand now." Brushing the hair out of my face, I grinned enthusiastically. "Then let's begin."

By now, Afrien had grown so much that I was smaller than his hand, and I always had to be careful not to be stepped on. The Spirit Pact definitely helped things a lot, and eventually we could even read each other's minds. It was kind of awkward, seeing other people's thoughts, but it also helped us understand each other much better. But as every day passed, the Black Mage continued to devastate Ossyria in search for power and the monsters kept coming. We would have to make a move soon, but it was difficult. All the residents of Ellinia seemed apathetic about the whole situation, and didn't really care too much unless they were threatened. However, I had not forgotten my visions. There would be four other people who would join us in the fight, and no matter what it took, I would find them and we would defeat the Black Mage. I still feel kind of ashamed that the only reason why I decided to do this was just to avenge my parents' deaths, but now I was fighting for more than that. Now I was

beginning to realize how precious peace is, and I'd be willing to protect it with my life, and I could tell that Afrien would too.

"Grendel asked me to come with him to a meeting in Ereve about the Black Mage. But I can't bring you..." I frowned as I glanced over the letter. The Empress herself, Aria, had requested that all the major leaders in Victoria Island come discuss matters with her at Ereve, and they could bring some select people along. Naturally, Grendel had chosen me, and to be honest, I felt a little bit queasy.

I'll be fine, master, he reassured. _I can defend myself well._

I smiled faintly. "So it's 'master' now, huh? Well, I know better to question you. Just stay here in this cave and I'll try to come back as soon as possible."

He settled down on the stone floor and stretched out. _Don't rush yourself._

Gripping my wand to prepare a teleportation spell, I called out, "Make sure to let me know if there's anything wrong!" and a flash of blue light whisked me away.

Afrien prowled the cave restlessly, watching the entrance. Monsters scuttled around nearby, but they knew better than to get too close, and they stayed outside. His eyes shifted from one place to another, and the stench of evil was thick in his nostrils. Something else was here.

Who's there? he growled menacingly, baring his fangs. _Show yourself!_

The shadows rippled, and a disembodied voice said coldly, _Hello, Afrien._

He whipped around towards the source of the voice, and floating ominously there was a figure, its shape lost in the folds of its dark robes. Two glowing, snake-like eyes peered out from under the hood, and its mottled fingers were clad in rings.

Black Mage...you are not welcome here! Afrien snarled, feeling the mark on his forehead glow brighter than before.

The Black Mage seemed amused. _I am only here for an audience with you._

And why do you seek such? Since when does the Black Mage stoop to politely chatting with those who challenge his goal?

He felt some frustration at the dragon's intelligence. But of course, he hadn't expected this to be easy in the first place. _Onyx Dragons have always had...irregular...power. They never reach their full potential. But you seem to not be affected by this. As a scholar, I am simply curious - does the Spirit Pact give you strength?_

Afrien narrowed his eyes to slits and glared suspiciously at the floating figure, but decided to answer his question anyway. _Yes, it does. But these questions are not ordinary ones. I assume you did not come all the way here just for some research._

But what if you could have a greater power than even that of a Spirit Pact? Would you take it? the Black Mage pressed, smiling eerily.

And what price comes with this power? He reached into Freud's mind and telepathically sent him a warning.

Spreading his arms as if beckoning a friend, the mage responded, _Join me, of course! Betray that puny human and join me, and I will give you power beyond your imagination!_

Grudgingly, Afrien had to admit to himself that the Black Mage was excellent at tempting others to join him. But no, he would never accept anything from this filth. _I cannot backstab Freud, nor would I even if I could._

The Black Mage swore silently. The Spirit Pact must be an extremely powerful spell if this was true, and if this dragon and the human rose against him, they would pose an actual threat. _Then if you will not join me_, he spat angrily. _I will make sure to destroy you, your race, and everyone you care about!_ Dark energy swirled around him, and he vanished just as Afrien lunged out at where he once had been.

"He's nearly destroyed half of Ossyria, and you're not going to do anything about it?" I shouted, standing up from my chair. At the head of the table sat Empress Aria, a young woman in her twenties. She watched with a solemn gaze, and was saying something to Shinsoo, the divine bird that rested next to her. On her other side stood her advisor, who was looking at me with a dirty expression, but I couldn't help but feel frustrated.

"There are knights stationed all around Victoria Island," the advisor was saying. "The Black Mage will certainly not attack us, and Ossyria is not our problem."

"Are you blind?" I yelled back, my knuckles turning white. "He's not going to leave us alone forever! We're just sitting around doing nothing while people are getting killed!"

On the other sides of the table, everyone muttered amongst themselves, probably not saying the most pleasant things about me. Grendel was quiet, and stroking his beard in thought. The chief of Henesys was grumbling under his breath, his face flushed red. Everyone was restless and disagreeable, and I was so utterly exasperated by how none of the people here had common sense.

Suddenly, Afrien's voice spoke in my mind. _Trouble, master._

What is it? I asked, trying to calm down.

I will tell you when you come back, he said, a tone of urgency in his voice.

I pushed my chair in and picked up my wand. "I'm leaving," I announced, ignoring the looks of surprise. Storming off, I stomped away from the conference pavillion.

"Wait!" a soft voice called from behind, and I turned around. Empress Aria was hurrying to catch up to me. "Freud, please wait."

"What," I snapped, but I found it difficult to get angry at her.

She studied my face. "You're going to fight him, aren't you? The Black Mage?"

Shrugging, I spun my wand around. "Yeah."

I half expected her to protest and say that I couldn't do that, but then she just got a faraway look in her eyes and clasped my hand. "Good luck," she whispered, and headed back to the pavillion.

For a moment, I stood there, stunned. Then I remembered what Afrien had said I shook myself awake. Blue energy swirled from the tip of my wand, and I was teleported back to the entrance of the cave.

Ducking back in, I called out, "Afrien?"

I'm here, he replied. I turned towards the wall of the cave and saw him resting there with a brooding expression on his face. Something was obviously troubling him.

Reaching into his mind, I detected anger, sadness, and...fear. He was almost never afraid. "What happened?" I demanded, sitting down next to his head.

Closing his eyes and sighing, he said quietly, _The Black Mage vowed to destroy us if we would not join him._

It was silent for a bit. So he really was intent on going after us, and I could tell that he kept his vows pretty seriously.

"The feeling's mutual," I muttered, standing up and conjuring a small fire. It cast ghostly shadows that danced across the stone walls. "Come on, Afrien. We have to leave."

Cold rain pelted the ground, and I shivered, wrapping my traveling cloak tighter around myself. Normally, I would've waited for a sunnier day to set out, but now time was of the essence. We couldn't afford to lose any, and I felt bad taking Afrien away from the rest of his kind.

"Where to startâ€¦?" I mulled over my map for a moment. Afrien leaned down close, examining the images. "So many places, so little timeâ€¦" Occasionally I felt nervous for taking on such a big endeavor, but hey, the Black Mage wasn't just going to defeat himself.

I hear there's a warrior in Rien who has mastered the polearm Maha, he offered. I raised my eyebrows - Maha was said to be a very temperamental weapon, and quite literally. They said that a grumpy spirit inhabited the sharp blade, and it could control ice. _Shall we go there?_

"Alright," I agreed, but my legs felt like stone and I stumbled. We had left in a rush and I had written a letter to Grendel explaining where we were going, but I kind of regretted not coming more prepared. After all, travel was laborious, with or without a mount.

He noted my exhaustion. _I could carry you, master._

I shook my head vigorously. "I'm fine. Besides, I know you're not very good with the cold, and you should save your strength too." Leaning against a tree, I sighed. "Afrien...I...I have to apologize first, before anything."

What for? He tilted his head in confusion.

"For dragging you into this whole mess," I admitted. "If I had let you go with him...then he wouldn't try to attack the rest of the Onyx Dragons, and - "

Nonsense, he interrupted, his voice strangely firm. _We chose to fight this battle, and so we shall. You need not feel guilty for anything._

Staring at him for a second, I was surprised by how determined he was. Then I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. "You fire-breathing magical therapist, you," I said fondly. He nudged me slightly, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

* * *

><p>And as a bonus, here's an excerpt from the Resistance story that I'm working on, since there isn't enough written material to post as a separate story of its own yet.<p>

Holding my breath, I inched across the wall and looked around warily. No one seemed to take notice of the high-school girl slinking around an alley, holding a suspicious-looking stick. I couldn't let anyone see me, because then everyone's cover would be blown, and of course that would be bad. I'd almost made it to the secret entrance when a gruff voice sounded behind me.

"Where d'you think you're going, kid?"

Startled, I jumped and turned around. Standing over me was a tall man in a black coat and hat, with a sharp chin and blonde hair. He glared down at me, and I put on my most nonchalant smile. "Oh, hello, Watchman Wonny! Just heading over to this pipe to clean it out." I gestured at the gaping tube next to me.

He narrowed his eyes. "Doesn't look too dirty to me."

I rolled my eyes and waved the stick, which I had disguised as a plumbing brush. "Have you seen the inside of it? Do you want to go in there right now and check it out?" Wonny recoiled and I cheered silently. "Be my guest then. Last time I put my head in before my brush, I had to shower three times to get all the slime off. Never doing that ever again." I wrinkled my nose for the extra effect.

The watchman stepped back and pulled his hat down. "Alright, alright. I'll leave you then."

_Doing a small fistpump, I glanced around again. I quickly bent down and shoved myself into the pipe, holding my nose as I crawled forward. It seemed to keep on going, but I groped around on the floor

and found a small handle, just barely raised above the bottom. Grasping the cold metal, I backed up and pulled it, grunting with the effort._

Underneath was another passage that led straight down and was made out of material different from the pipe systems, and it plunged downwards into a black hole with no visible ladder.

Grinning slightly to myself, I reached into my pocket and pulled out several attachable rungs - this was always my favorite part. Putting one on, I stepped down and put down a second. You only needed two rungs if you knew how to use them properly, and I jumped off onto the ground. Now the path was tall enough to stand up in, and I reached a large door.

6. Chapter 5: Queen of Elves

****Note - Sorry for the short chapter, school is starting soon for me which means less updates :(The next couple of chapters are already written, they just need to be revised/edited.****

****[Edit] Thanks to Angel for pointing out an error, fixed.****

* * *

><p>The warm sunlight sifted through the tree branches, and the silence was calm and tranquil, pierced only occasionally by the chirps of birds and leaves rustling. It was a very fitting environment for meditating or thinking, perhaps, but not so great when you're trying to focus on one small target with a dozen pair of eyes trained on you.<p>

It can be incredibly nerve-wracking. After all, I was _the_ queen of the elves, masters of the bow and arrow, and if there was anything I was supposed to be able to do, it was to split a wooden target clean in half with one shot. All the elves learned archery to protect ourselves if we were put in danger, and so it was a natural instinct, like when you picked up a bow you could practically feel the energy running through it and you would automatically know what to do.

Me, it didn't really work out too well. I could never concentrate on one thing for too long, my style was more of rapid-fire rather than one precisely aimed arrow. My fingers would always shake if I held a bow for too long, and they weren't really meant to work like a gun.

But still, I was the queen and I didn't want to disappoint my people, so of course I attempted archery, and probably failed numerous times. Extra points for effort though? No? Psh, fine.

"You've got to hold it more like thiiis," Danika stressed, demonstrating with her bow. She nocked an arrow and let it fly, piercing the target straight in the center. "See, Mercedes? It isn't too hard."

"Says the Elder of War," I complained, picking at the fletching on my arrow. "Of course it'd be easy for you."

She clapped me on the back. "Come on, just do it! You'll never know

'till you try." After a moment of hesitation, she added quickly, "I'm not that old, you know."

Smiling slightly, I took aim at a second target and fired my best shot.

It only hit the outer ring, and I groaned. The other elders and all of the kids who had gathered to watch sighed. Danika bit her lip. "At least you didn't miss?"

I slung the bow over my back and grumbled, "I'm probably the lamest elf in the history of lame, I can't even shoot one measly arrow properly. How am I supposed to be a good Queen like this?"

"You already are," she reassured me as we walked out of the training center. The sight of the children playing in the paths was always relaxing to the mind as they squealed in delight and pushed each other around. Their parents waved at us, and I waved back, though half-heartedly, and I couldn't help but feel left out as I spotted some of the older elves taking turns shooting at a target.

Turning a corner, we headed towards the Great Tree, my favorite place to sit and think. It was, as its name stated, a large tree with pink leaves like every other one in Elluel, the village of the elves. Blue magic symbols ran up its thick trunk, protecting the town from danger.

Running my fingers through my hair, I plopped down at the tree's roots. One of the many things I loved about being an elf Queen was that you didn't need to act dignified or royal all the time - it would be perfectly alright for the Queen to spill food on her clothes or burp in public (not to say that I did). "Remind me again, how did I end up becoming the Queen when I can't handle a bow?"

"Because all of us cast a vote and you won," Danika grinned, sitting down next to me and cradling her bow. "Don't start doubting yourself now, you're an amazing Queen."

One of the most unique things about us elves were that in our society, everyone was equal. There was no such thing as royal blood, peasant blood, noble blood, or whatever. Everyone lived in perfect harmony with each other and nature, and even the King or Queen weren't absolute rulers. They didn't decide what people could do or couldn't do, they just acted as a leader to counsel their people in their times on need. Whenever a King or Queen retired, a vote would be cast for the next one, and it would include every single elf that fulfilled the age requirement. I had been the youngest candidate, and needless to say I was very skittish when they announced my name.

"And besides!" she said loudly, shaking me out of my thoughts. "I've been working on something that I think will help you with your archery problem."

I sat up a bit straighter. "Really? You'd do that for me, Danika?"

"Yes, of course!" She seemed to get more cheerful just talking about it - after all, she was the Elder of War, so naturally these kind of things grabbed her attention pretty well.

"And here I was thinking that I was hopeless. What is it, some sort of potion or something?"

Fiddling with her bow, she plucked the string absentmindedly. "Um, not really. And it's not anything too original either," she added. "I was just thinking about the way you use a bow, and maybe it really is the weapon's problem. Do you think you might be able to do better with a set of Dual Bowguns?"

"Dual Bowguns?" I brushed a leaf off my armor and squinted at her. She didn't seem to be pulling any sort of joke and looked completely sincere. Now that she'd mentioned it, I vaguely remembered what they were. Bowguns were, like their name stated, a cross between a bow and a gun, and were meant to be used two at a time. They fired very quickly and were powerful, but handling one required perfect coordination and timing. There were few who even knew about it, since they were so limited. "But those...there's practically not a single elf out there who can use them as well as a normal bow! And you think that - "

Flashing me a confident look, Danika replied, "You might be able to use them. You always did complain about not having a rapid-fire bow. And besides, you're the - "

She was probably going to say "And besides, you're the Queen," but she was interrupted when Philius, the Elder of Magic, rushed up to us, huffing and panting. He scrambled up the steps, leaning on one of the pillars in exhaustion.

He had probably been running to get to us. Or maybe he was just out of shape? After all, he was a couple thousand years old. It's pretty hard to keep up an exercise routine for that long. "Danika, your sister, Athena Pierce - "

She immediately rocketed up. "What did she do this time?" Of course - Athena Pierce always seemed to be making trouble around Elluel, even though her skill with a bow was phenomenal, especially for someone her age (she was about 200 years old - how I envy the young). And she also had no problem talking back to the elders and breaking rules, which more often than not landed her in sticky situations.

"Ethos told me that she wandered out of the town, and since there has been an infestation of Slimes around the borders - "

I shot up too, instantly alarmed. "They're too strong for her, she'll be killed!" Gripping my bow, I dashed towards the gate. "I'll go get her!"

"Wait, Mercedes, you're not strong enough either - " Philius reached out to try and stop me, but I had already headed out the exit, oblivious to his words.

7. Chapter 7: Lost and Found

****Note - Late update, school just started so the chapters might be getting shorter. There will probably be one more update over the weekend.****

* * *

><p>Pushing branches out of my way, I flinched as one whacked my in the face, but kept on going. It was eerily silent, and I wondered why I wasn't being attacked. Then again, all the Slimes would probably have gone after Athena Pierce. What did she get herself into this time?<p>

Even past the border gates of Elluel, there was no sign of her. Did she wander off into Ellin Forest, or Ellinia, as they called it now? The thought of her being around filthy humans made me shudder in revulsion. Elves and humans aren't exactly best friends, and we always tried to avoid contact with them. Because
reasons.

Suddenly, a loud shriek cut through the air and I picked up the pace, looking around rapidly for the source of the scream. Although elves had heightened senses, it was still difficult to tell amongst all of the twisted trees and jutting branches that bounced the sound around haphazardly. Standing still, I concentrated and listened carefully.

Over there!

I shoved my way through a clump of vines and nearly leaped backwards. A whole horde of Slimes were clustered around a tree trunk, and hiding in the branches was a young elf girl with grayish-blond hair and a green dress, and she was clutching her bow in fear.

"Athena!" I called out, picking my way over to her. _Bad mistake_, I realized as all the Slimes turned their attention to me and began advancing threateningly. Mental note to future self: never underestimate blobs of green goo, even if they might be kind of cute.

Fingers shaking, I nocked an arrow and shot it clumsily. It hit one in its back and stuck there, but it didn't do much more than irritate it, and it began hissing. Do Slimes even hiss? Do they even have vocal cords? Whatever, this was a life-death situation. "Stay back!" I cried, but they seemed undeterred. One launched itself at me, and I smacked it away forcefully with my bow.

Second bad mistake - as I watched in disbelief, the wood began smoking and I tossed it to the side frantically, where it crumbled into ashes. Since when were they acidic?

One day I'm going to sue science, I thought angrily as I took a step back - third bad mistake - and my foot was tangled in some vines, tripping me. Pushing myself up from the ground I tried to tug my foot free to no avail, and all of the Slimes leapt up at once and charged.

"_Duck!_" a loud voice shouted from somewhere in front of me, and bewildered, I ducked as ice blasted over the monsters, disintegrating them into particles of shadow.

Breathing hard and shivering, I shook snow off my hair and I looked up to see that an entire swath of the forest had been draped in frost and icicles like some sort of a bizarre blanket.

"Dammit!" the same voice said, accompanied by rushed footsteps, and I jumped. Running over was a human in red robes, holding a gold-colored wand. Gripping my arm tightly, he pulled me up, and my face flushed bright red. "Are you alright?"

Still slightly stunned, I nodded, swallowing hard. Turning towards the now-frozen leaves, he eyed the ice with a disgruntled expression. "I didn't intend for any of the forest to freeze over, but whatever." For a moment I caught his gaze, and I was startled by how wise he looked, even though he couldn't be much older than fifteen years. "Is the other one okay?"

Athena Pierce had climbed down from the tree and was hanging her head in shame for causing so much trouble, and I put an arm around her shoulders comfortingly. Then the shock subsided and I realized that a human was grabbing my arm. Quickly I smacked his hand away, and he stared at me as if I'd just grown a third eye. "We're fine," I said stiffly, checking over my clothes, but as soon as I saw what was standing next to the human my cold-shoulder facade shattered and I yelped. "T-there's a dragon! Right behind you!"

The dragon was different from any others I had seen - its scales were a dark indigo and its horns and claws were gold. A glowing symbol was on its forehead, but it didn't seem too aggressive to me.

"See, you scared her," the human said teasingly to the dragon. "This is Afrien. He's friendly."

Unlike you, he might as well have added. Looking back on it, a sharp smack wasn't exactly the best way to thank someone who just saved your life.

Hello, a deep voice said in my mind. I yelped again and backed up.

"It talks?!"

Are you an elf? inquired the dragon, whose name was apparently Afrien. It - well, he - was polite enough, I suppose.

The magician - or so I guessed - looked at me. "An elf? I thought for a second your ears were kind of different, but I didn't think I'd see one - no, two - in Ellinia, of all places." I found it slightly strange that he didn't seem severely offended by my actions, and he wasn't too bothered by the fact that I was an elf either. His tone was casual as if talking to elves was something he did every day. Then again, you didn't just run across a sentient dragon capable of speech often, so he must've been pretty used to strange stuff.

I edged away slowly, feeling kind of intimidated, but I was a queen, and I couldn't show any weakness. Attempting a straight face, I composed a rigid expression. "Um, who are you? And why do you have a dragon?"

He scratched his head. "I was about to ask the same of you - well, not anything about a dragon, but still." Bowing respectfully, he said, "My name's Freud, and Afrien's my friend." After assessing me, he noted, "Size can be misleading. I'm just short for my age, and I'd take a guess that you're a couple hundred years old?"

Folding my arms, I grumbled, "Pretty decent guess." It slightly ticked me off that a human, of all creatures, had to jump in and save me. He seemed to be somewhat knowledgeable, which went against almost everything I had been told about humans. As I said before, elves hate humans because reasons.

"My name is Mercedes - well, Queen Mercedes to you." Huffing, I lifted my chin to show him that I wouldn't be daunted easily, though that Slime business had, admittedly, been rattling. Freud seemed taken aback and he said something to the dragon.

Opening his mouth, he was about to say something when more steps sounded behind us. "Athena! Mercedes!"

Danika pushed her way through the tangled branches. There were a couple of bleeding scratches where some thorns might have nicked her, but otherwise she seemed unaffected by the Slime assault. "Thank the Great Spirit the two of you are alright!" When she saw Freud, her shoulders immediately stiffened, but she forced a smile anyway. "And you are - "

"That's Freud," I cut in, determined to try and avoid any tension. "He helped us out with the Slimes."

He dipped his head slightly and made a small gesture as if to say, _Carry on, I'll just be over here in this corner pretending I don't exist._

Athena ran up to Danika and clung to her leg, shivering. She sighed and whispered something to her, which seemed to make her calm down a bit. "How bad was it, exactly?"

"Pretty bad," I admitted, ashamed that even as the Queen I hadn't been able to do much. "I've never seen the Slimes act this violent before. Why do you think they - "

"They're being influenced," Freud said calmly. "You haven't heard the news?"

"What?" we both demanded at the same time.

He frowned as though we were being incredibly dumb. "And here I was thinking words spread pretty fast...apparently not. All the monsters in Victoria Island - and everywhere else - are stronger and more aggressive because they're all being influenced by one power - or rather, one person. The Black Mage."

Danika shifted around uncomfortably. "I've heard of him. He's this insanely powerful guy who attacked Ossyria, right? But what does that have to do with the elves and Victoria Island?"

That has everything to do with the elves and Victoria Island. Afrien's deep voice rumbled again in my mind. The Elder of War made a small strangled noise, and I could tell that he was talking to her as well. _The Black Mage seeks to conquer the world - or, perhaps, "destroy" would be a more accurate word._

I threw up my hands in exasperation and said, "Wait a second. So are you telling us that it's the end of the world?"

Freud raised his eyebrows quizzically. "No, of course not. Not if Afrien and I can help it."

More confused than ever, I squinted at him, slowly realizing what he meant. "You're going to fight? Against this Black Mage that, from what you're telling me, is strong enough to single-handed buff up every single negative being out there in the world and is actually aiming for world domination? Are you really that eager to die?"

"No, not really. And that's why I'm not just going to sit back and do nothing."

"For a human, Freud," I noted, looking at him with a newfound sense of respect. "You're actually not half stupid."

"For an elf, Mercedes," he returned, and I jumped when he said my name. "You're actually not half illiberal." I detected a faint hint of sarcasm.

Clearing her throat, I just remembered that Danika was still standing there awkwardly. "Um, we should probably get back to Elluel and...check on things." She waved wildly as if unable to decide an appropriate gesture.

"One more thing." Turning to him, I asked, "Are you going to be fighting alone?"

"Of course not. Afrien and I are sticking together, and we're going to look for more allies." At the mention of his name, the dragon grunted and smoke curled from his nostrils.

The Black Mage...if he really was intent on destroying Maple World...and if there were actually people out there fighting against him, then maybe I could do something. In every single story you hear about some evil maniac conquering the world, there are always some people who stand up against them, and there are always those who hide in fear and accomplish nothing.

There are two kinds of people in this world.

Fight or curl up in a pathetic little ball, it's not really that hard of a decision to make.

After all, I was the Queen, and if the elves were threatened by this guy, then it was obligatory to defend my people from danger. Even if I did die, I should at least die trying.

Well, pessimistic thoughts aside. Like I said earlier, elves and humans have a rocky relationship. Neither really likes the other, because _reasons_. But I never knew what those reasons were, so maybe it wasn't really that bad. Maybe humans could actually be decent. Maybe they could prove to be reliable allies.

Alliesâ€¦|

"You've just found one," I said, smiling, as I turned to leave with Danika and Athena.

He looked surprised for a moment, and then smiled back warmly, and I ran over one last thought in my head.

Maybe they could prove to be reliable allies.

End
file.